

Unitarian Church of Harrisburg

February 12, 2017, Clover Lane

Cindy Terlazzo

A Reading From Dr. Amanda Kemp – *Walking While Black*

Dr. Amanda Kemp graduated from Stanford University and earned a PhD from Northwestern University. She has taught and performed extensively much of her life. The following is from her book – *Say the Wrong Thing*.

It could have been any usual morning, except it was not. I set out for my morning walk wearing a mid-thigh, black suede coat. I start walking. I see a white family of three or four kids and two adults playing while waiting for the bus.

Immediately I feel weird. I feel like a threat. I am Black, dark brown, I have dread locks. I am wearing a black coat that could conceal something bad.

This is not my neighborhood, not my state and not my home. I am an outsider. I am in a middle class neighborhood in Hamden, Connecticut.

No one in the family speaks, and I keep my eyes forward so as not to offend or be offended. I feel fear. It is 8:25 am. I worry that someone will call the police about a suspicious Black woman walking.

As I walk, I wish I had chosen my lime green sweater. It's cute and it seems to increase my innocence. Black is dangerous. It hides things. I am dangerous. I could be hiding something.

These are the automatic thoughts that I notice myself thinking only after I pass another collection of white adults and children waiting for the bus. As I pass this group, a woman smiles and says "Good morning." I respond and smile – a little. I keep walking.

I realize I have internalized all of these messages about Black people, about myself as a threat. I pick up speed. There is nothing wrong with me, I insist, still worried about my black, suede coat that a white friend had given to me. You are going to be okay, I tell myself. I search for a hair band to tie up my dreads.

As I climb a hill I open the coat. There. Nobody will think I'm hiding a weapon. I am wearing a pink fitted sweater and an olive cardigan. I am innocently female.

As I reach the top of the hill I feel a little relieved that all the families are gone. I don't feel like a threat. Still – I practice what I will say to the police: I'm visiting my friend and her address is_____. I am proud that I remember her address.

I worry about my son, about black boys and men who walk outside their neighborhoods. Threatening. Suspicious. Trayvon Martin sits in the back of my consciousness. I worry that they don't have female innocence to draw on, a cute lime green sweater or a fitted pink top to cue the outside world that they are not a threat. (Of courses, that did not save Sandra Bland.)

I arrive home. I go to the guest bedroom. I meditate. I write.

This is what it is like to "Walk While Black."

**Living in Tumultuous Times –
Cultivating the Courage to Say the Wrong Thing
Unitarian Church of Harrisburg
February 12, 2017**

We have so very much to be grateful for in this life – such as the fact that we are alive, that we are able to gather together in this community. At the same time it is an understatement to say that there is also much that is quite concerning. You don't need me to tell you that we are living in tumultuous times. With a new urgent concern emerging every day it is difficult to know where to focus our attention. Yet it does help to slow down enough to focus our energies in a singular direction.

Even though the election of Barack Obama in 2008 brought with it the hope for a post-racial world, the years since have opened our eyes to how much remains to be done toward dismantling the systemic racism that has been a cornerstone of this society since its inception. We may grow weary and frustrated when it seems that there is no

end to the work that needs to be done, YET - here we are - in the midst of life filled with tremendous possibility and tremendous challenge.

What are we to do?

As Unitarian Universalists we look to our seven principles to help us guide our actions. These principles describe the world we long to live in – one that is just, compassionate; a world that recognizes the interconnectedness of all life, that values the inherent worth and dignity of all persons. Yet we have learned that we cannot fully inhabit that world until we understand how deeply rooted we are in a social structure that is systematically oppressive. Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Tom Schade remarks, “[As UUs] our engagement with our role in the systems of oppression has been fitful, painful, divisive, and uncomfortable. Given our demographic base – [as a group] whiter, richer, and more privileged than most Americans – it was never going to be an easy ride. We are an unfinished work...The reality of systemic oppression is being forced into our collective national consciousness by the outspoken bravery of those on the margins.”

Yes, we have work to do AND there is so much we can do. It is incredibly important to engage in direct actions, to build relationships beyond differences but one of the first hurdles for us, is to acknowledge the existence of racism and figure out how we can begin talking about racism at all – particularly in situations that have the potential to become emotionally charged. Especially with people whose relationships we don’t want to risk losing. It is time for us to bring the messages of those marginalized voices into our own conversations. We have to be able to imagine for ourselves how it feels to be fearful of walking while black.

The only way to get to the future we envision is to be right here – where we are. We need our principles to serve as a vision of where we want to go but we can’t get there without doing the work before us right here, right now; work that asks us to look inwardly, to examine our own points of privilege while also reaching outward to develop relationships of depth and connection. Let us learn to have the kinds of conversations that invite us all to do this work together. These conversations are not the whole work that is before us but we cannot do this work without talking about race.

We have gotten used to living in a culture of extremes. We too often play the polite card and refrain from saying things that we think might upset another OR we become fully wedded to voicing a point of view from which we refuse to budge. Media has done much to perpetrate the barking heads version of public discourse. Too often what is presented are the loudest voices laced with sound-bite, twitter ready commentary. My husband is fond of recalling a time when it was the norm for genuine discourse to take place on public airways – when people with different opinions actually discussed issues in a relatively civil fashion.

The challenge that we are presented with is how willing are we to enter into true dialogue with another – particularly in the realm of race and social justice? How willing are we to risk presenting an alternative view that runs counter to the prevailing thought and how willing are we to engage with others and really consider what the other has to say?

Dr. Amanda Kemp has written a book called, *Say the Wrong Thing – Stories and Strategies for Racial Justice and Authentic Community*. In her introduction she poses the question – Why say the wrong thing? After all, the fallout from doing so can be uncomfortable and difficult. She answers her own question in two parts. “When we let the fear of saying the wrong thing rule us, we may get a semblance of safety but we do not experience deep love or connection. What’s especially deadly is that regular withholding from others actually compromises our connection to and love of ourselves. We become habitually inauthentic and unmoored from our center. We wage war on ourselves which gets projected out to other people and groups.” And “our vision of a just, compassionate world is only possible if we take risks.”

Engaging in this work can take many forms. To do this work well, it is essential to build connections with people we may not yet know – across all kinds of differences such as race and gender to name just a few. But equally important and perhaps just as challenging is to have authentic conversations with our family, our friends, and neighbors.

Sometimes we may simply not know how to enter into such conversations. A friend of mine shared the following story with me which I found to be quite instructive:

While watching the Olympics this past summer, my friend Jonah was stunned as he watched commentators struggle to find words to report that Simone Manuel, a young black woman, had won the gold medal in swimming for the United States. In all of the pre-race banter they had not even mentioned that she was a contender in this competition.

The commentators' reactions inspired conversation about what Simone's victory in this race represented in the bigger picture. Jonah was quick to voice that her victory held particular significance because, by and large, black people have not participated at this level of swimming competition due to systemic racism and oppression. After making this declaration, he let himself be talked down to agreeing that running is much more prevalent in Africa than swimming so it stands to reason that people of African descent would be more likely to win marathons than swimming events.

Jonah said he went to sleep feeling uneasy about the exchange. He had noted out loud that there were not a lot of people of color in pools in America and he understood the history behind this. But he said he still allowed a tired, flawed logic to sway him out of standing his ground.

Jonah emphasized to me that he thought it was important for him to, essentially, "out himself" and name that discussing racism can be slippery and confusing. The way that white supremacy has been institutionalized has gotten in the way of confronting our racism and overcoming it. He said it is really important to resist complacency no matter who you are talking with.

It was at this point in the story that Jonah revealed that this exchange took place with his father. He said that the next morning at breakfast he greeted his father by saying, "Dad, about that conversation about black people swimming? I don't feel comfortable with where we left that. Let's look more closely at who gets access to pools, basketball courts, ice rinks, coaches, nutrition...let's see what is modeled and incentivized and how..." And that is exactly what they did.

Jonah shared this story with me by means of Facebook. And what makes this story especially significant to me is a follow up post from his dad that I will share in his words:

“Our whole family was watching when Simone Manuel won the Gold – it was beautiful for no other reason than the exceptional athletic prowess this young woman displayed. Minutes later, as we began to consider what else this victory represented, I commented on how few black swimmers there are, I explained with uninformed certainty that this was, of course, due to the long history of African ancestors of African Americans not swimming, hence a genetic or biological predisposition for less skill in the water than European whites who came to this country.

My son Jonah and I argued a bit, he stating that this was due to access and institutionalized racism – a not uncommon position Jonah has taken in past debates. Eventually, he conceded my position as being more accurate...until this morning – when he forcefully withdrew his agreement causing all of us to begin some research.

We uncovered plenty of articles online about bone density, torso length, etc....all seeming to support my position – until we came to studies and blogs that also took into consideration economics, politics, access, fear, segregation, urban environments, white privilege and African history.

It turns out that there are plenty of very strong swimmers in Africa and that there is a clear relationship between why there are so few black swimmers and the history of slavery ([after all] slave owners did not want [their slaves] to escape). This, as well as other innumerable factors, has taught me a lot. If there is a biological relationship, it is miniscule at best.

I’m always grateful to learn – especially from my children – to grow, and to being called out when my assumptions are based on ignorance and unconscious conclusions drawn from a pervasive, racist narrative that remains in white culture.”

Wouldn’t it be great if all family discussions were able to be conducted with such respect? But even without a history of respect it is just as important to find our voice and speak out when such support remains unknown.

My colleague, Erika Hewitt, discovered this in a walk around her neighborhood. She shared this story and gave me her permission to share it with you.

“Yesterday a friend...alerted me to an apartment building, a block away from me, with a large Confederate flag waving on its flagpole. Around dusk, I walked over and through sheer coincidence; a woman emerged from the building. Neighborly conversation ensued – i.e., we introduced ourselves, and her dog sniffed me over thoroughly – during which time it became clear that 1) the flag was hung by her boyfriend/husband; 2) it’s always uncomfortable for white strangers to talk about racism; and 3) she was willing to hear me, a neighbor she never met, explain that regardless of the intention to celebrate the South, some of us interpret the Confederate flag as a symbol of bigotry and racist heritage, which makes us uncomfortable.

The flag DISAPPEARED OVERNIGHT.

Erika continued – “Now listen up: I’m not telling this story to pat myself on the back. This is about all of us. This is gratitude for people in my community who are willing to say “that flag makes my skin crawl,” so that I feel them form an invisible team behind me when I approach a stranger.

This is a reminder that “those people” whomever it is that you disagree with fundamentally – are not the enemy, and that while insults and put-downs are easy to reach for, they are weapons that damage our human relationships.

Erika concluded by saying – this story is affirmation of what is possible when we call our neighbors by name, and engage in respectful conversations – even when it’s hard. And this is me cheering on – all of you who risk engaging difficult conversations for the sake of respect and peace in our neighborhoods and our communities.”

We know that racism is certainly not a one-sided issue. One of my seminarian friends, a young man of color, said his uncle – a Pentecostal preacher – is one of the most racist people he knows. But it is not our job to keep score. Gandhi reminds us that an eye for an eye ends up leaving the whole world blind. Rather, our task is to look within so we can more clearly recognize our own biases, for in this culture – White, European, Patriarchal authority has laid the foundation for so much of the tumult that we are experiencing today.

Even if we abhor the violence that is rocking our communities and would never engage in racial slurs, the fact remains that systemic racism is insidious in our world and so many of our systems have been built to favor those who created them. It is up to us to look for the places where such biases exist, to name them when we see them and to engage in authentic conversations with others and take action as we work toward building the Beloved community that our Unitarian Universalist principles envision.

It is my hope that these stories have inspired you and will encourage each of us to do the work that is before us. It is my hope that we will take up one of the most compelling and important social issues of our times and jump in. Find or create groups where you can examine your own biases. Educate yourself through books and on-line resources about our collective history as it relates to racial issues. Seek out and work to build relationships with whomever you see as “the other.” Engage in civil discourse. Learn all you can about those who run for elected office or consider running for office yourself. Take your right to vote seriously. Reach out and risk saying the wrong thing with the intention of bridging differences and creating community.

We are the future we are waiting for – the builders of the world we long to inhabit.

May it be so.

Blessed be.